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ABSTRACT

This digest describes the population of migrant farmworkers, some of their educational challenges, and programs currently available to serve them. Challenges cited include the constant mobility of migrant farm workers as they follow the crops, lack of a national record system to track the progress of adults, lack of transportation, and lack of child care. Fear is also a factor; many undocumented workers are afraid to apply for programs even when qualified. The two main types of programs available to these workers are homestate and "upstream"--in either case it has been found that incamp programs with social assistance components are the most effective. The most crucial factor, however, is personal goal-setting, with instructional materials that capitalize on the learning styles and strategies of the students. The choice of staff is also crucial, and regular feedback from learners is important to keep classes on track and provide teachers with essential information. Recommendations are provided for additional services. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Literacy Education for Adult Migrant Farmworkers

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Mobility affects every aspect of the lives and learning of migrant farmworkers. Although migrants bring few belongings as they travel from crop to crop and from labor camp to labor camp, they do bring a wealth of experience, motivation, and resourcefulness. Effective migrant camp literacy programs must be sensitive to the particular educational challenges facing migrant farmworkers, and at the same time foster and build on their strengths. This digest describes the population of migrant farmworkers, some of the challenges in meeting their educational needs, and some of the programs that have been developed to serve them.

Who Are Migrant Farmworkers?

Migrant farmworkers follow the crops across the country, returning to home states or home countries for the winter harvest season. Because migrants move continually and are often undocumented, the migrant population is difficult to count. A recent study estimated that there are 1,661,875 migrant farmworkers in the United States (Migrant Health Program, 1990). The majority are between 25 and 44 years old and have an average of 5.5 years of schooling (Slaughter & Associates, 1991). Most migrants are Latinos; of these, most are from Mexico, while others are from Central America and Puerto Rico. They come to the United States for a variety of economic and political reasons. Many are not literate in their native language, which is usually Spanish.

Challenges to Education

Educational programs for migrant farmworkers face a number of challenges. One challenge is that migrants must move from one program to the other as they follow the crops, and there is little coordination from one program to another. Exhausted learners, many of whom are unaccustomed to formal schooling, must learn the systems of each new program and often must undergo repetitive assessment and entry procedures. Moreover, no national record system exists to track the progress of adults. The migrant student record transfer system, used to track elementary and high school students, is not available for adults.

Chronic barriers to education include lack of transportation to class sites and lack of child care. The transportation problem is especially acute on the East Coast, where workers rely on crew bosses for transportation to work and classes. A camp-based program with mobile teaching units eliminates the need for transportation to community class sites, but such an approach is beyond the resources of many programs. Most in-camp programs instead rely on traveling teachers who bring materials into the camp. Although child care is sometimes organized for classes held away from the camp in community settings, adults attending in-camp classes often bring their children with them. Poor health, exhaustion, and fear of detection by immigration authorities may also discourage a migrant from making the effort to attend class.

Those migrant workers who are undocumented are often afraid to apply to programs, even when they are eligible. With the Special Agricultural Workers' (SAW) legalization program, many farmworkers had access to literacy education through the amnesty education programs administered through SLIAG (State Legalization Impact Assistance Grant). However, literacy programs operating under SLIAG are not reimbursed for teaching undocumented workers, and not all programs are ready to receive the influx of learners with low levels of literacy.

Successful programs need to include support services such as child care, food assistance, health care, and immigration and legal assistance administered by bilingual and culturally sensitive individuals.

Educational Programs for Migrants

There are two types of educational programs available to migrant workers—homestate and upstream, either of which might take place in the migrant camp or in a community location. The homestate program is located in the migrants' winter base of operation—usually Texas, Florida, or California—where the harvest season is longer and they work for the longest stretch of the year without moving. Homestate programs allow longer class sessions with possible re-enrollment from winter to winter, but migrants still lose newly-developed skills during the extended time when they are working in other areas and have limited access to classes.

Upstream programs, for migrants working away from their home state, face many challenges. Migrants often work longer hours, since summer days are longer, and they move frequently, so their contact with the program is brief. These programs must be flexible, even including late night classes. Many upstream programs cannot meet the challenges of flexible scheduling and uneven attendance that intensive harvest work creates. However, even a short-term positive experience with education can enhance a learner's self-confidence and willingness to continue learning (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Whether homestate or upstream, in-camp programs with social assistance components are the most effective. They can provide migrant farmworkers with the resources they need, recruit and retain learners more effectively, and tie classroom learning to the camp environment. Classes held in community locations such as in churches or schools might enjoy better light, educational equipment such as blackboards and chairs, and less noise, but transportation difficulties and the possible intimidation of a formal setting for an unaccustomed (and perhaps undocumented) learner might not always be worth it. In the camp, learners are on their home ground and can operate from a position of confidence.

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Whatever the type of program, almost all providers of literacy education for adults agree that it must be designed around the needs of the students. Auerbach (in press), for example, argues that the process in successful programs is "from the students to the curriculum rather than from the curriculum to the students." To meet the needs of adult learners with limited time in a program, personal goal setting is crucial, with instructional materials capitalizing on the learning styles and strategies of the students (see Pharness, in press). Slaughter & Associates (1991), for example, recommend an individually tailored approach of "case management" that includes both education and support services.

Many programs offer competency-based, survival skills, or life-skills curricula. If created with learner participation, these curricula can be effective; but it is wrong to assume that all migrant farmworker learners need or want the same units of instruction; a migrant cannot wait to complete standardized units before taking up individually relevant tasks. Only the learner can define what a "competency" or "life skill" means personally, and those definitions inevitably change as the learner's circumstances change. (For further discussion see Auerbach & Burgess, 1985.)

Traditional programs that are text-oriented, test-managed, and teacher-controlled are unlikely to meet the needs of migrant learners who have little experience with formal education, may lack self-confidence in educational settings, and must realize success quickly. Participatory or learner-centered programs that identify and build on the experiences of the learner, involve learners in setting individual and program goals, and employ confidence-building assessments have a greater chance of success.

The choice of staff is also crucial. Bilingual and culturally sensitive recruiters and teachers are needed to cope with the apprehensiveness of new learners, especially the undocumented. Bilingual staff can also better facilitate needs assessments, discussion circles, and other learner-centered activities as well as provide native language literacy instruction (for discussion see Rivera, 1990). These teachers need training and support in curriculum design, materials development, and techniques for managing individual and group instruction in mixed-level classes with uneven student attendance.

Conclusion

The key to addressing the long-term challenges of literacy instruction for migrant farmworkers lies in the involvement of learners in program development and delivery. Regular feedback from learners can keep classes and programs on track and provide teachers with essential information for scheduling classes, planning units of instruction, and providing support services. Where possible, migrants might also serve on curriculum planning committees, critique proposed materials, and serve on advisory boards that meet in camp locations at times convenient to the workers.

Many additional changes need to occur before literacy programs will truly meet the needs of adult migrant farmworkers, and programs need support while these changes are developing. Support could take the following forms:

- Involve learners as teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum advisors, and board members.
- Centralize information from effective programs, including material on program administration and practical class techniques.
- Develop interest sections in existing associations to address farmworker concerns.
- Conduct non-traditional assessments that allow programs to track learner progress.
- Establish a national record-keeping system for adult migrant learners.
- Establish a national professional association of migrant farmworker literacy administrators and staff for training, networking, and policy recommendations.
- Increase the allocation of government funds for adult migrant programs.
- Develop sources of non-government funding for the education of undocumented adult farmworkers.

Programs for Migrant Workers

The following articles describe programs serving migrant adults:

Fountain, C. (1983). The lessons of HEP: Education, career education and enrichment. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 20*(3), 122-127. (EDRS No. ED 286 359)

Valerien, J. (1990). *Literacy training of migrants and of their families and cultural identity: Literacy lessons.* Geneva, Switzerland: International Bureau of Education. (EDRS No. ED 321 070)

The following directories list programs serving migrant adults:

Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs. (1988). *Building educational foundations: A survey of the literacy initiatives undertaken by the Job Training Partnership Act, Title IV.* Washington, DC: Author. (EDRS No. ED 315 624)

Quezada-Aragon, M.L. (1986). *A directory of organizations and programs in migrant education.* Las Cruces, NM: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. (EDRS No. ED 279 483)

Salerno, A. (1989). *Directory of programs: High School Equivalency Program (HEP) and College Assistance Migrant Program (CAMP).* Tallahassee, FL: Florida State Dept. of Education. (EDRS No. ED 319 454)

Salerno, A., & Fink, M. (1989). *Dropout retrieval programs.* Tallahassee: Florida State Department of Education. (EDRS No. ED 318 587)

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Auerbach, E. (in press). *Making meaning, making change: A guide to participatory curriculum development for adult ESL and family literacy.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, Center for Applied Linguistics.

Auerbach, E., & Burgess, D. (1985). The hidden curriculum of survival ESL. *TESOL Quarterly, 19*, 475-495.

Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.* South Hadley, MA: Bergin-Garvey.

Migrant Health Program. (1990). *An atlas of state profiles which estimate numbers of migrant and seasonal farmworkers and members of their families.* Rockville, MD: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

Pharness, G. (in press). *A learner-centered worker education program.* Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education.

Rivera, K.M. (1990). *Developing native language literacy in language minority adult learners.* Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education.

Slaughter & Associates. (1991). *The education of adult migrant farmworkers.* Woodland Hills, CA: U.S. Dept. of Education.

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